

## **Interview with Keith Farnish**

Interview conducted by Richard Capes for [www.moretht.blogspot.com](http://www.moretht.blogspot.com)

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*1. Hello. My name is Richard Capes, and this is a [moretht.blogspot.com](http://www.moretht.blogspot.com) interview with environmental writer, philosopher and activist Keith Farnish about his book 'Time's Up! An Uncivilized Solution To A Global Crisis'. Okay, to begin with, Keith, could you tell us why you gave the book the title you did and what its central argument is.*

K: 'Time's up', the book itself, it was originally titled 'A Matter of Scale'. It was a combination of two ideas. The idea that everything humans are doing...civilized humans are doing on the Earth affects things at a huge variety of scales. The other thing that came around was the idea that – and this is something that came to me...and I've mentioned this before and it always sounds a bit weird when I write it... I was having a shower – I was still working for a financial organisation – and I was having a shower in a gym, and the idea suddenly came to me like I'd been hit on the head with a hammer: and it was just this phrase, 'What matters is what matters to us'. And it was so simple, but then I had to try to work out what I was thinking about. And that actually is the key principle behind 'Time's Up', then 'A Matter of Scale'. So you've got this combination of matter and scale. That was published online as the book, 'A Matter of Scale'. Then the publisher Green Books got hold of it and said "we don't really like the title", and I can understand that. It's not very memorable. And then someone suggested 'Time's Up'. And I thought, well that's good. And then I thought about it, and then I realised that it actually meant a lot more than they meant. The idea of 'time's up' from the conventional point of view is 'we're finished', everything we're doing is destroying everything, and on a superficial level, yes. But time's up is actually a lot more meaningful than that even, in that it's saying, in the development of the idea, that time has to be up for industrial civilization because, as we will explore, civilization is the only thing that really is a monumentally destructive force; not humans, but civilization. So if we want to have a future, civilization has to end. That's obviously a massive challenge for everyone who considers themselves to be civilized.

*2. Is it only industrial civilization that needs to end or civilization as a whole?*

K: I use Industrial Civilization with capital letters to differentiate between the current form of civilization we live in and other forms of civilization that have and still exist. So Industrial Civilization is this behemoth structure that has actually engulfed a number of other civilizations. It is the first global civilization that has ever existed. There have been civilizations that – you have to understand that civilization as a concept is ultimately going to be a destructive thing, because of what it is founded upon. It's founded upon the centralization of power, hierarchy, it is founded on cities, which are net importers of things, be that food, be that raw materials, be that energy, and then cities throw all this stuff out again in the form of waste and anything else. So cities are not sustainable, they take over the area around them, and this creates a distance between the city and the city-dwellers, and the impact they're having. So psychologically civilization is destructive as well. Older civilizations have been destructive, but on a localized basis. So, if we think about the Mayan civilization, then obviously there was a destructive process that went by. There was deforestation, there was slavery, there was hierarchy. But it occurred at a fairly localized level, mainly because there wasn't cheap energy around. So Industrial Civilization is the monumental structure. It is something that goes beyond anything that humanity has managed to create in the past.

*3. Some people believe civilization began with the emergence of agriculture, and that it needs to end as well. Do you have any thoughts about this?*

K: If you get rid of Industrial Civilization, you'll get rid of industrial agriculture anyway. You won't need the intensity. Let's be clear, if you get rid of Industrial Civilization, you're getting rid of a hell of a lot of people as well. And this is very much the fly in the ointment, and I – I have to be very careful when I talk about things like depopulation, because...and I must have put this caveat in right at the beginning: I do not, under any circumstances, promote any form of eugenics, any form of mass depopulation, any form of mass murder or genocide. These are abhorrent ideas that I will not be associated with.

*4. What would you say to someone who argued that Industrial Civilization can't end without there being mass genocide?*

K: If we don't do something about civilization in general, it's going to do something about itself. It's going to collapse in appalling devastation. And the system is on a downward spiral as we speak. It's going to start crashing in all sorts of ways, as I've written about in length in the book. And, in a way, you can either have a controlled - in as much as it is possible to have - removal of civilization and the mindset, the culture that surrounds that, or you can have this appalling collapse, which is inevitable. And anyone who says that we're not going to have, for instance, huge energy crashes, or devastating water shortages, or pandemics of diseases that we've not yet seen the full extent of, is quite frankly denying themselves reality, because we've seen examples of this happening already.

*5. What do you think about the idea that we can solve all of the problems Industrial Civilization faces with technology?*

K: I'd like to know anything that you can solve with technology in the long term. I'm talking about - well let's be realistic, let's talk about the lifetime of a typical human being. What can you solve with the vast majority of technological breakthroughs that have taken place over the last 200 hundred years. You're not solving anything, all you're doing is using more energy, you're creating more consumption. These aren't solutions. This is a perpetuation of the culture of industry, the growth of everything. So, technology as a solution is simply playing into the hands of the industrial system. If you hear anyone saying, 'We can solve our energy problems with technology'. Okay, you show me. You show me anywhere that a problem to do with energy on anything more than a micro-level – and I'm talking, for instance, someone's house - has been solved using technology, and I'll show you a liar.

*6. In the first part of your book, you look at how "almost everything we are doing to our environment is affecting something else at some scale or another". Could you explain why you chose to begin the book this way?*

K: Well really, the idea of the scale, it came about as trying to find an interesting and absorbing way of demonstrating something that we know anyway. Another part of this was showing that anything we do effectively is going to come back and bite us. And we've seen examples of this throughout history, on many different scales. So, for instance, we've seen viruses getting out into the wild - that's the wrong term, that's me being institutionalised here – viruses getting out of the wild and into civilization. And if you effect, for instance, some kind of industrial farming system, like, for instance, the mass production of chickens, then you will get bird flu on a rapidly mutating and unpredictable scale. If you - and this is addressing viruses, for instance, so H5N1 – we've actually seen in the last week, the possibility that a mutated version of H5N1 could be back in the system. And typically the argument has come out that we much watch out for bird migrations and wild ducks and things like this. And I'm thinking, 'Okay, and when was the last time anyone said let's shut down all the factory farming'. And of course you won't hear that because that's the civilized way of doing things.

And then you look at bacteria. Unlike viruses, bacteria breed more rapidly as temperature rises, so you see everything as a bacterial entity – and you can come from the most sort of mundane simple bacteria, like salmonella, for instance, that is an ancient bacteria. Tuberculosis is another pretty ancient bacteria as well. As temperature rises bacteria can multiply more rapidly and we see this happening again in the way that certain conditions have been able to move their way throughout the globe, through temperature changes.

One thing I wanted to look at was the atypical, and this is actually why I went on to nematodes, which I would say most people have never heard of. It's something I hadn't looked at in any way before I looked at the book, but it's a fascinating area. If you're a farmer then you've heard of nematodes because nematodes are things that can devastate your crops. And food supply being as critical as it is in the industrial world, we have to keep the food system going otherwise you can't feed these mass populations, and certainly you can't get huge amounts of foods into cities. Anything that causes any kind of change in the production of food is potentially devastating, and nematodes have that potential to devastate vast numbers of crops, which is why, if you ever go to a garden centre or a nursery and you look for seed potatoes, you will see a certification that that seed potato has been checked for certain conditions, including nematodes - the presence of nematodes - because if you get [harmful] nematodes into a field then that field is ruined. So, this is something that few people have actually looked at but it's a very significant thing as far as civilization is concerned.

And we can go through the scales from – I mean, I looked at bees, I dispelled the myth that if bees disappear then we're all doomed. If we lose honey bees, then for honey bees that's a really terrible thing. The vast majority of colonizing honey bees are bred by professional breeders to carry out pollination on an industrial scale. If honey bees undergo massive depletion, then it will be an economic catastrophe, but it wouldn't necessarily be an ecological catastrophe, except for, as I say, honey bees. This is an interesting example of the way that the news is skewed to always assume that anything that affects civilization and especially the economy in any way is a bad thing.

*7. In this same part of the book, you talk about bananas and say that they're in danger of disappearing completely. Could you explain why?*

K: In their natural state, there are hundreds and hundreds of different varieties of banana. They're plantains, they're a shrub, effectively; they're actually a perennial plant, not strictly a shrub. And most bananas are not yellow either. They can be green, they can be purple, they can be red, all sorts of colours, just like carrots can, actually; most carrots are not orange in their natural state. But the lovely big yellow curvy banana that we're used to that doesn't contain any seeds is a genetic hybrid of a number of varieties of banana, and it's a clone. These bananas through the way in which bananas are produced from cuttings, they're clones of each other. So you've ended up with this global monocrop of one particular variety of banana. And this is not the first time this has happened. There has been at least one other occasion where you've had a variety of banana that was wiped out entirely by a fungus. And it looks like the particular variety of banana we have now is also going to be wiped out by a kind of fungus. But this is not all, because it turns out that there are two particular types of nematode that target the particular type of banana that we most commonly eat and they are on the increase as well. So the monocultural way that civilization produces food is its own worst enemy because it turns out that just like – well this is probably an analogue, for instance, with the Irish potato famine, where there's a very few varieties of potato...Irish people didn't just eat potatoes. There are a lot of other things that Irish people ate prior to the famine. However, there were very few varieties of potato, and a number of varieties of potato would have provided more resilience to the particular blight that led to the famine. But there were very few varieties, so although 'banana blight', whatever you want to call it, is not going to be as devastating, by any means, as the Irish potato famine, it's certainly not - this situation has an analogue throughout history, and it will be repeated every time we're obsessed with eating a very small number of things.

*8. In second part of the book you look at why it matters that we are bringing about our own demise. What would you say to someone who argued that it doesn't matter, that the human race isn't important?*

K: I'd say that's your choice. It certainly wouldn't be the first time I've heard it and it won't be the last and there've been a fair few number of people on websites who've said, 'Why don't you just kill yourself if you're so worried about population?' Although as I've said it's not just population I'm worried about. I actually love life. I deeply adore life and the more I become connected to the world that's around me, the more I love life. It's actually a very civilized view to not accept death, and I find myself falling in two different directions, particularly with the stuff I've been reading recently. Carolyn Baker's books have been having a great influence on me, particularly her most recent one, 'Navigating the Coming Chaos'. They have been helpful in allowing me to understand the necessity of death and how to approach it, and the cyclical nature of life and death. However, that does not mean to say that you can't embrace life as a wonderful thing, and beyond everything, human beings, like all creatures, want to ensure the success of their species and, in the vast majority of cases, that is not a conscious thing. That is simply that every successful species has evolved that way because it's good at replicating.

So, the longest lived species, those that have been around for the longest time, have replicated the most successfully, and they have been in a position within the ecological web that they are able to continue both in a sustainable manner, i.e. they're not going to wipe out what they're dependent upon, nor can other things wipe them out. So human beings, as evolved creatures who have evolved successfully to occupy an ecological niche, or a number of ecological niches, want to carry on replicating. And that power, that force, that biological necessity to reproduce is extremely powerful. And anyone who says, 'Oh well, let's just give up now' – well, okay, but that ennui attitude does, to a certain extent, deny your biological desires to reproduce. And maybe only humans can go, 'Oh well, let's just forget about it'. But let's not lose sight of what we are as biological entities. We are here to reproduce, and that's ultimately what all creatures are for. We really have to continue simply because we are what we are.

*9. Are you saying that humans don't have a spirit or soul?*

K: Well, not at all. The problem is there's this conflict of ideas between...people say, 'Oh, you're too scientific, you can't talk like that. Embrace your spirituality.' Well, actually I'm a scientific person. I believe that the scientific method is a sound way of doing things because I've analysed it carefully and I've actually come out with the same opinions. No one's told me that, well, actually that makes a lot of sense. If you want to show something works, use a methodology that can be repeated, use a methodology that's based on evidence. I'm also – I wouldn't say I'm a spiritual person, but I'm a soulful person. No science can tell me why I like sitting by the river or walking through a woodland. That involves a huge amount of complexity. And there are certain areas you shouldn't use scientific analysis on simply because they do defy description. And this is why you have poets; this is why you have artists. And these people are not saying you can use a calculation to say that this is this. You can try and express something in a certain way, but it can't be reduced down to science.

So you can have this dichotomy and that's not to say that one side is better than the other, simply that a number of ideas need to be used to approach any concept, and if that makes me a weirdo, then fine. But I'm sure there are plenty of people like me who say, 'Well yes I agree that you can have scientific understanding of something and also be a soulful or spiritual person.' And it really peeves me when I and many people like me are pigeon-holed – 'Oh well, you believe in the continuation of human, you think we should be sustainable and good to the ecology. Have a look at this natural health remedy', and I look at it, and I go, 'Well that's bollocks! There's no evidence for it. Go away!' Yeah, I'll be quite frank: you've got to have different attitudes to different things.

*10. In exploring the question of why what we're doing to the environment matters, you say that within Industrial Civilization humans are not vital, but only relevant. Could you explain what you mean by this?*

K: Right, yes. I look at human beings from three different perspectives. I look at them from the ecological perspective, the cultural perspective, and the personal perspective. Those may not be the exact words I use, but they're the ones that make most sense to me. From an ecological perspective, yes, as people say, if humans disappeared, well probably, almost certainly, it would be a much better place for the rest of life. And you do need top predators in certain environments, but you don't need civilized humans in any environment. So, certainly if civilized humans disappeared, then the rest of the ecology would breathe a sigh of relief.

From a cultural perspective, humans are – it was probably the most difficult thing to look at really because you have to consider how civilization uses human beings. And this sort of comes later on – how humanity is exploited by civilization. But really you've got this strange situation where without human beings obviously there would be no civilization, and without the input, the 'willing' – I put that in quotes – the 'willing' participation of human beings within the industrial system, then the industrial system would collapse. So, therefore, you would think that human beings are absolutely vital to civilized culture. However, human beings in civilized culture are also expendable, and we can look at that in terms of war. We can look at that in terms of industry, which obviously war is a form of. We can look at that in terms of the – really the way the civilized culture does things to the environment in which humans live.

So, for instance, if you have a rich river environment in which there has been settlement, its settled around that river, its dependent upon that river, upon having clean water, and that's absolutely a vital thing. Clean water – settlements don't happen around rivers just so you can get from one place to another. Those rivers have a huge range of inputs into that settlement and for those people, and clean water is absolutely vital, as is food being in that water. So, for instance, fishing is a fairly universal factor for human beings living by water. Now, if a company comes along and says – or rather a corporate government comes along and says, 'Right, we need more energy. What's a clean, green way of getting more energy?' – well, this is what they say nowadays – 'Right, well, we need hydropower. Let's slap a huge slab of concrete in the way of this river. And then we can generate lots of clean, green energy from this slab of concrete and the turbines that are embedded within it, okay.' And everyone goes, 'Wahey! Green energy!' Obviously, in the past it wasn't green energy. Obviously in the past it was just about generating energy. It's about controlling the river system as well.

For instance, the High Aswan dams in Egypt were about controlling the flow of the Nile. And these dams were put in place so the flood waters of the Nile could be controlled and also electricity could be generated. As a result of them, the sediments no longer flow down the river and the large areas that were previously farmed along, particularly near the Nile delta no longer have enough sediment to support them. And this is a rich substance, this was not just sediment; it contained organic material, it was self-fertilising. And, suddenly, this whole culture of farming on the Nile delta was wiped out because there wasn't the sediment anymore. So what the hell did the civilization, under King Nasser in this case – what the hell was he thinking when he did this? How much did he really care for his people? And I use 'his people' in this ownership way that you only get within civilization. What the hell was he thinking when he did this? Well, he couldn't have thought much of the people that lived in the Nile delta. And he couldn't have thought much – a company that slapped a dam in the way of a river and stopped salmon flowing up a river to their natural spawning ground and to breed and to give birth and move backwards and forwards in their natural cycles – the company that did this obviously didn't give a toss about the people that may feed off these salmon. And this leather tannery that just happens to be down the river, chucking all of its crap into the river – well, they obviously don't give a toss for all the people that happen to rely on clean water for drinking or washing because of all the crap that they've thrown into the river.

So, yes, when I say that civilization really doesn't give much heed to the rights of humanity, and it doesn't actually care much for human beings, then, yes, I mean what I say. It needs humans, but also doesn't care much about them.

*11. Large numbers of people seem to regard cities as one of humanity's highest achievements. However, you completely reject this idea. Why?*

K: Well, cities are the highest achievement of civilization, so, if you're a deeply imbedded civilian and you think that civilization is, by necessity, the best thing that humans could have created, then, of course you're going to think cities are great, because cities define civilization. Cities include all of the classic aspects of what it means to be civilized. They're seats of government, power and money, and learning and they concentrate resources and surplus. They concentrate people so that they can work for the system. All of these things, so you see a great teeming mass of people in one place and you think, well, 'that's humanity'. Well, it's not humanity. That is civilization. And even expressed in those terms, cities are – well I would say you only have to wind back a hundred years to London. London is probably the best example of a city developing in a classic civilized manner: through squalor, through disease, through fires, through the political turmoil. And eventually – I won't say, coming out the other end – eventually, where we are now. Well, what London has is an awful lot of people living in a variety of social strata, which is another fairly unique thing about civilization.

I'm not saying it's missing from all other cultures, but putting people into classes – you have the workers, you have the people who manage the workers, and you have the people who manage the people who manage the workers – within London you have all of these classes. You also have a load of money in the form of financial centres. There's not much manufacturing anymore. There's not much in the way of docks. Because all of that's been moved elsewhere. So London manages the money now. London manages the money, moves it around, as a result of all the shitty things that Industrial civilization does in the rest of the world. So, mining things, manufacturing things, moving stuff around, drilling things, scooping things out of the sea – all of this stuff is all managed through money, which is what London seems to be good at now. And only cities are capable of doing this. This concentration of everything is only possible with cities. So this is why I say that cities are the defining factor of what makes a civilization; and they are also utterly terrible things because of everything that comes out of them and because of everything that results from them.

*12. In the same part of the book, you reveal you are the father of two children. Being an environmentalist, wouldn't it have been a natural choice not to have had children?*

K: I address this in the book. And I do admit that it could be seen as hypocritical. I would say a couple of things. First of all, when we decided to have children, I didn't think the way I do now. That's not an excuse in any way. Time moves on and everybody changes their mind about things. However, I certainly couldn't imagine life without the children I've got. So that's one thing. The other thing would be I don't know whether I would want to have children now, knowing what I do about the future, given that the future we're talking about - say 50 years time, 70 years time. Do I want my progeny, who I'm ultimately responsible for, to be growing up in a world that is collapsing?

And I take a certain amount of blame for this, as everyone should, for what's happened. In my case, I don't get depressed about this because I'm trying to do something about it. And in a way it's because I've got children, I think I do a lot of what I do. Because I don't want them growing up in a world that is full of horrors, and I feel I have to do something about it. So there is good and bad about it. My views on other people's children? Well, am I qualified to say - probably not on an individual basis. However, certainly we wouldn't have the density of population we have if cities didn't exist. You can't have huge populations without cities. It's just not possible. I believe the proportion of people living in urban areas globally is now past 50%. And that really is a sobering fact: to know that although cities occupy a tiny proportion of the world's populated land, 50% of all the people in the world live in those cities. So without those cities, you couldn't have all those people.

But we're in a really difficult situation now because the first thing that's going to happen as collapses start, is the cities are going to suffer. And that's dreadful, it really is. And I don't think anyone knows what to do about that, except just keep the cities going until everything totally collapses, and maybe inject us all with a substance that makes us forget what's going on while the collapse is taking place. Because, to be quite honest, it's not the kind of thing that you really want to think about on a nice sunny day.

*13. So, you don't seem to have much hope for the future then?*

K: Well, I'll say two things. First of all, I don't have any hope, because I don't use that word. But we'll probably come to that later. The other thing is that, as I mentioned earlier, the reason I don't get depressed about these things is because I'm being active in really trying to do something about it. So I believe there are ways out, there are things that can be done. I believe they're extremely radical and that very few people have thought of them. Whether they become adopted quick enough depends on whether it's gone about in the right way, which is what I'm addressing in my second book. But, yes, I think whatever we do, we can only make the best of what we have now. And that means that you can either have a total and devastating collapse of everything and whatever it happens to leave behind. And no one can predict what it's going to leave behind. But I think some of the apocalyptic films and novels, such as 'I Am Legend' is a pretty good one to start with, apart from the vampires. That's some kind of situation you could end up with. Stephen King's 'The Stand' is another thing that's worth looking at. Or you can say, 'I think there is something we could do to make this less painful'. And I'm not talking about a mass injection of Soma – I'm talking about something really positive that doesn't rely on hope, that relies on people getting out and doing something, and actually trying to change the minds of the civilized. And this is where we need to be, I think, to make things as best as we can.

*14. This brings us to the third part of your book, in which you look at why people aren't doing more to stop the environmental destruction taking place. So why aren't they?*

K: In one word, 'civilization'. That's why we're not doing it. Civilization thrives on people being disconnected. And the irony is that I'm talking to you through a form of connection that civilization considers to be a great thing. This is something that other people come to me and they moan about. They say, 'Well, you can't use the internet for saying the things you do. How dare you even write books because they're civilized and what have you.' And I say, if someone comes to my house with a gun and I'm going to shoot you, whatever, I'm going to try to find a gun and shoot them back. I mean it's not – or at least I'll turn the gun on them. 'Oh no, you must try and join arms and try and hope this person goes away, or just sing them a nice song.' That person's going to shoot me in the head and I'm dead, and may go after my children as well. So let's be realistic here.

*15. So you're using the tools of civilization against civilization?*

K: Essentially, that's what it is. The kind of connection that we now think about in terms of the internet, in terms of telephony, in terms of mass communication by the movement of vehicles, etc., - that connection is not the kind of connection I'm talking about in the book. That kind of connection is a massive disconnection from the things that we really need to understand in order to survive. So I'm talking about the connection that is inherent in every human being and in every species on planet Earth that is not tangible if you are a highly civilized person. It barely registers at any point unless you make an effort. I'm sitting here in a room at the moment. It'd be nice to go outside and feel a little bit of the late summer sun. That's a wonderful connection. Just listening to the birds and going for a walk. I'm just going to do a bit of weeding and pick a few courgettes, and things like that, and maybe cut some wood. These are very natural, connected things, because they help you to understand where we come from. The soil, the air, the land, the sky, the water – I'm very lucky to live near a river, and just watching the river flow past has inspired some fairly bad poetry, but that's a personal thing.

These connections are things that we've tried to commoditize, and you can't commoditize them, you can't create them in the form of artificial experiences. White water rafting makes us excited not because we're wearing yellow jackets – life preservers – or someone shouting out, 'Let's experience the great outdoors'. 'The great outdoors' – well just go outdoors, just go and embrace something that is around you that is not a commodity, that is not an experience that you haven't had to pick off a shelf. The connections I'm talking about, that we need, are the

connections that are about life. They're connections with each other, they're connections with the rest of wild nature. They're the connections that fill us with life, and fill us with real meaning. That's why I said you can both be a scientist and you can be a deeply spiritual, soulful person. And I suppose connection is closer to spirituality or soulfulness than it is to science, definitely. And we have to be able to embrace that in order to see where we came from and try and see that separation we currently have between civilized humans and the real world. Because we've cut ourselves off, we're stranded at the moment, and I'm starting to sound like an evangelical preacher now. But sometimes it's the only way to address things. And I feel that without that kind of connection and understanding of what we're doing to the world and how it's deeply affecting us and how we can get back to the real world and try to understand it again – without that then we really are finished.

*16. In your exploration of why people aren't doing more to stop the environment from being destroyed, you include a list of the techniques Industrial Civilization uses to keep us disconnected. Could you tell us about some of these techniques?*

K: This has actually undergone some kind of metamorphosis recently because the book I'm writing at the moment, 'Underminers', is very focused on what I call the 'Tools of Disconnection'. And I've actually added a few. But there are ten that I've looked at in the book 'Time's Up'/'A Matter of Scale'. There are actually 15 now in the new book, and one of them is just one that I didn't even think of, which is so powerful. So, I would perhaps like to touch on that one towards the end. But just to look at some of the more obvious ones. One of them, for instance, is, 'Sell Us A Dream'. 'Selling us a Dream' is about making us desire things that we haven't got. But the desire is generated, the desire is manufactured. So if you haven't got something...For instance, I overheard someone yesterday talking about getting an iPad, no iPhone 5. I get confused with all the numbers now. I thought 4 had only just come out. But apparently you've got to have number 5, that's just coming out. And I remember walking along Princes Street in Edinburgh, right, and looking at a queue outside a mobile phone shop. And they were just standing there, and there was this security guard standing at the door looking equally bored – though the people who were queuing looked a little bit excited, actually. And I just asked someone, 'What are you queuing for?' And he said, the iPhone whatever it was is coming out. And I said, oh, okay. And then something just cracked in me, and I just started shouting out, in an entirely sarcastic way, how important it was to have the latest of everything because you're not a human being unless you've got the latest version of everything, and you just go in there and you just gobble it all up, and you understand what it is to be great to have all of this stuff. But these people –well, I could have actually been arrested for breach of the peace for that, such is the wonders of the law, for telling people they don't need consumer goods.

But this is such a disconnected thing, craving things that we're sold. And I go on talking about different aspects of this in various Tools of Disconnection. But there are other things like, for instance, authority – putting in our place, making us feel like we have to live in a hierarchy, using examples from, for instance, Stanley Milgram's studies – the appearance of authority making people do things they would otherwise not dream of doing: giving people electric shocks at lethal levels. And that hierarchy that's put in place absolutely disconnects us from the real world. It stops us doing things. It stops us doing things for ourselves. It makes us want to work for the system. We have obvious things committed by the system upon us. Certainly, if you're in any kind of position of power, of any type, then you will commit this upon other people.

So, you scare people, you make people think, as I heard on the radio yesterday, oh, 'Can you give us some good news about the economy?' 'No, I can't give you any good news. It's all bad. Yes, the economy's going down, the Dow Jones index is looking bad and there's no economic growth.' And I'm thinking this is great! This is brilliant! The growth in the economy mirrors the emission of greenhouse gases. Growth in the economy mirrors the destruction of natural habitats. If we haven't got economic growth, we're not destroying things. We're not emitting as many greenhouse gases. Between 2008 and the middle of 2009, the emissions of greenhouse gases, they didn't quite go down, because we do have these feedback loops in the system – but, the emissions of greenhouse gases stalled because of the economic slump. And you want better evidence of why economic growth is a bad thing, you look at that, and you look at the crash of 2008 and what good it did in an environmental sense.



And then you listen to someone say, 'We need economic growth. If we don't have economic growth it's really bad news.' - and we're scared, we're made to have fear of not having economic growth. The system makes us want economic growth. And this is a lie. It lies to us because it needs to keep growing, and by doing that it disconnects us again from the real world. It disconnects us from the things that we are doing that are destroying the planet.

And the last one I talk about in the book is 'Give Us Hope'. And hope really winds me up. I've addressed this - I've slightly tempered this in the book, 'Underminers', by saying there are certain kinds of hope which I would say are okay. I said this in 'Time's Up', I said if you're just saying to someone, 'I hope you have a good day', or, 'I hope everything goes okay', then that's a nice thing, that's just being a nice person. And I think you can also have the kind of hope where you've done everything you can do about something, and you're getting into the crossing your fingers stage - 'There's nothing more I can do; I've worked hard on doing something', whatever it happens to be, and all you can do is sit there and have hope. And that's fine. I'd say that was a perfectly rational thing to do. However, if you stop doing things by hoping - and I'm talking about the kinds of things that many so-called activists consider to be 'action', like going on a march - and I'm not talking about the kinds of marches that took place in Egypt, for instance, or in Syria now; these kinds of things are brave and dreadful things are being committed upon the marchers, because the governments think these marches are a genuine threat to the establishment. I'm talking about the kinds of marches that take place when you're waving placards around and saying, 'Stop this pipeline', and I'm talking about the people who have been arrested on the steps of the Capitol Building recently in Washington, protesting against the tar-sands pipeline, the TX pipeline. And they're getting arrested for sitting on the Capitol Building and thinking that this will make any difference at all. It would be just as effective to go home and close your eyes and hope that things are going to get better, because that's effectively all they're doing, because the government are going, 'Wahey! No one's sabotaging any pipelines. No one's trying to break up this company, TransCanada, who are building the pipeline. No one's trying to convince the world that they don't need oil anymore. No, they're sitting in front of this building, shouting.

*17. So do you think all forms of protest are pointless then?*

K: I don't think all forms of protest are pointless. I think certain kinds of direct action can be useful. Some forms of protest - and this is something I'm addressing in the next book, and I keep harping on about it because it's what's on my mind at the moment; haven't finished it yet - some forms of protest can be useful distractions from stuff that people are doing. And this is something that has been used in the past by activists, but obviously only in a very underground and very strategic way. This is not something you would plan in public and say, while this march is going on then we're going to break into this building, because obviously the march would be banned.

*18. So it's only organised protests that you don't think are effective?*

K: Yeah. If you go on a march and that's been approved by the local authority and the police, well, what's the point of the march? I mean, you tell me why any kind of march that is approved is going to change anything. And the same with signing a petition. 'My God, I got some letters through my door, and they said this is my name and address. Wow!' - I'm talking in the voice of, say, a chief executive or a senator or whoever - 'Oh, wow, it's terrible all of these names on a bit of paper. I've got to do something.' It really is not going to make a blind bit of difference. And this is the hope myth. This idea that you can do something and it's completely symbolic. But in your mind you're hoping that it's going to make a difference.

*19. You also think that voting is something else that disconnects us from reality.*

K: In certain circumstances getting the vote is a step to something that is more representative and better at the time for certain groups of people. But then again it could be a red herring. And certainly the suffragette movement was an example of where it wasn't so much getting the vote – and I think that's a bit of a myth. Feminism and sexual equality – the vote's a symbol of that. Equality in general is something that is absolutely necessary in any society. An egalitarian society is the first step to real freedom. Having a vote is perhaps a symbol of that. But a vote, per se, really makes no difference, because in the civilized world you are voting between two parties or two representatives of exactly the same system. The quote is from the anarchist Emma Goldman who said, 'If voting changed anything it would be illegal.' And I think that's a fantastic phrase. Because you've got to understand – and we are not registered to vote anymore, there is absolutely no point. And when we had someone come to the door and say, 'Oh, you haven't registered to vote', I said, 'Do I have to?' 'Well.' I said: 'Is there any point?' And she said: 'Fair enough.' Whoever I vote for is going to make absolutely no difference, so I'm not going to.

*20. Another activity you consider trivial - and this might surprise a lot of people - is recycling.*

K: Yeah, it is. People get recycling confused with all sorts of things, like re-using. I went to a couple of boot fairs yesterday actually – I don't know what they're called in the rest of the world, in Scotland they're called booties or boot sales, but essentially they're like second-hand sales of things. We bought quite a bit of stuff that we needed. This is not recycling. This is reusing what other people don't need anymore. Reusing is a good thing because it means you don't have to buy something new. Recycling is an industrial process. Composting is not recycling. That's another myth. Composting is a great thing – in an enclosed environment composting is absolutely necessary, because it's a step in the process to creating new soil, and putting nutrients back into the soil, so it's absolutely necessary. Recycling is the industrial process where you take a waste product and you turn it back into its constituent raw materials using energy, using an industrial process, and apart from a very few materials, recycling doesn't actually save anything.

And, in addition, and this was the point I was getting at. We have been convinced, in the civilized world, and, particularly in places like Germany and the UK and in the USA, that recycling is the best thing you can do and it just makes you feel great, and, oh, there's nothing more you can do, that's better than recycling. Well, I'm sorry, but if you think recycling is that important then why are you still driving around? Why are you still buying stuff from the shops? Why are you still doing all the other stuff that's really, really destructive? And it just really gets to me that we think recycling is the ultimate form of being green. And it's always thrown at me. I just want to get it out of people's minds. And I just want to say, no, this is what the system wants you to think is green, this is what the system wants you to think is sustainable. Recycling is a white elephant.

*21. Towards the end of the third part of your book, you say - and again this might surprise a lot of people - that you feel sorry for the 'Elites', the people who have more influence and material than the rest of us. Why is this?*

K: Yeah, I said in a way I feel sorry for them because - there is a build-up to this. It's a section called 'Who's in Charge?' And what it culminates in is the chapter after that which is effectively saying, 'You are the system'. Anyone who is part of civilization is effectively part of this system, and we are all responsible for perpetuating this destructive system, by being part of it. By agreeing to all of the things, such as voting, such as recycling, such as doing anything, particularly things like going to work and working for a corporation or being educated in a school that says that you're willingly agreeing to all of these qualifications which ultimately are about you getting a job and being a good consumer, etc. So, yeah, we are the system. But there are people who have got power, who have got more power than the rest of us.

Some of them are having a few nasty shocks at the moment. And I'm thoroughly enjoying the Murdoch circus at the moment. But there's more Murdochs around. There are people who we've never heard of that are hugely powerful, probably because they're so obscure and boring. So why these people want to be in the position they are, want to have this level of responsibility and power and wealth - well I can possibly understand the trappings

of wealth on a short term basis. 'I've got everything what more can I want?' Well, of course, you're completely disconnected from the real world, but enjoy yourself while you can. To be someone who can sign a piece of paper and create thousands of new slaves in a call centre, or in a new factory, or say, 'Right, I'm going to sign a bit of paper', or 'I'm going to send an e-mail that converts a huge amount of forest to a palm oil plantation.' - If you're at that level, it's psychosis - you're a psychopath. You really are. And, actually, the author Jon Ronson has recently released a book called 'The Psychopath Test', which does show that most CEOs would go down as psychopaths. If they took the psychopath test, or other people on behalf of them, they would be psychopaths. Because you have to be to carry out such horrible, destructive things and live your life and be able to get sleep. So, yeah, I do feel sorry for these people to a certain extent. They've got to this mental state that - I think by being in this position it's made psychopaths of people. And I think that's a horrible position to be in. And we have to watch out because the system is potentially making psychopaths of all of us.

*22. Some political organisations depict the people as if they've got a great life, that all this wealth and influence makes them happy. But you don't see it this way.*

K: They also make them out to be potentially good guys. They usually are guys. You look at organisations like WWF and the Nature Conservancy who are so much in bed with these corporations that they've virtually merged with them, and committed all sorts of perversions with them, to be quite honest. It creases me that these organisations can then say that they actually care about the world and they care about other people when they are so enjoying the company of these CEOs and enjoying the company of these corporations that are doing such terrible things. And the corporations are going 'Wahey! We've got the WWF badge. We look good.' And this is a whole new area, really. This is green-washing plus. And this is an entire chapter in the new book about what real activism is about compared to this corporate-funded idea of what it is to be green, and I've just had enough of it.

*23. In the last part of your book, 'How to Survive', you discuss various ways of bringing down civilization. Could you tell us about some of these ways?*

K: In the first book, I talked about this in terms of ways to accelerate change, and I did use some of the ideas taken from 'The Tipping Point', which is an excellent book from all different aspects. If you're a corporation and you're fond of an idea and you want to make that idea go through then 'The Tipping Point' is very useful. But also, if you're an activist, then 'The Tipping Point' is equally useful because you can see how change can be brought on in a very pointed and organised way. I looked at the power of context, for instance, and how ideas could pick up a topical area. And so, for instance, economic growth is very relevant at the moment, because the economy is heading into a second period of recession, and it's likely to be even deeper than the previous one. The context of that is a wonderful environment in which you can try and address this great lie that you need economic growth. So you can start talking about this to people, you can start saying, 'Well, what the hell is the point of having economic growth? Why do we need it? Shouldn't we be contracting if we want to reduce environmental destruction?' And there are all sorts of ways that you can get on and go and get this message across.

*24. Have you done this yourself?*

K: I've done this on numerous occasions - I've got various websites that I write. I talk on radio, I send messages, and I just try and get this meme out that economic growth is a completely unnecessary thing. There's all sorts of other types of these. Talking about the idea of the meme - this is something that I talk about in level three, in 'Time's Up'. But I'll bring it up now. The idea of the meme is essentially this cultural idea, this thing that can potentially embed itself in an entire culture. And we have this meme at the moment that says economic growth is necessary. We need to create a meme that says 'Economic growth is unnecessary, and a very bad thing.' Other

memes, for instance, could be the way that we address something like civilization. Civilization as a concept is universally seen, of course within civilization as a good thing, everything to do with civilization. If you say to someone they're civilized, then it means they're a lovely person. Well, it doesn't. It means they're a lovely person. A lovely person is a lovely person. If someone's civilized, they can still punch you in the face. If someone's civilized, they can still pour a load of pollutants into a river. If someone's civilized, they can still bulldoze people into holes in the ground in the name of a just war. The nature of civilization is just being civilized. It is doing all of these things that are associated with it.

*25. Have you noticed any of your ideas become part of mainstream culture?*

K: I'm only going to see something as significant when people outside of the people I associate with start saying things. And this idea of 'connection' – that was something that I suddenly started seeing last year, and everyone started talking, commentators started talking – I was listening to the radio, and I was listening to people who were talking about connection all the time. And whether it's just me being aware of this word more, or people are actually saying about connection as being an absolutely vital thing, I really couldn't tell you. I may have just picked up the zeitgeist, as I said to you earlier on, or something genuinely did happen as a result of this. I don't know.

But the point is, you need quite a few people to be doing this at quite the same time. You can't just have one person, because that one person will only be able to do so much. And a very important lesson comes out of this: no one person can save the world. And to be honest that's a trite thing to say anyway about saving the world. No one person can bring down civilization, or at least return us to a state in which we are able to continue humanity. It is a communal effort. It is the effort of many, many people at many, many different levels, and we have to be doing all sorts of different things. Which is what I address in the book 'Underminers', why I try to look at so many areas and as I've repeatedly said in it, 'You can choose which bit to do. Find the bit that's best for you. Find the bit that you are best at or you find most enjoyable or you're most passionate about and do that, because that's where you're going to make the most difference.'

Change is not going to come about by some direct force. It's going to come about by people doing things that they are most capable of doing. But being absolutely clear in their minds as to what they're trying to achieve at the lowest levels. We have to look at the root cause of things. We can't just say, as so many people say, 'Oh, right, well let's elect so-and-so politician', or 'Let's try to get some law put in place that won't allow this or will allow this.' That is not addressing that root cause. The whole system is screwed and it really needs to be undermined. I really can't stress this strongly enough.

*26. On your website you've produced a list of ways in which people can undermine civilization. Could you talk about some of those?*

K: There was an article I put on The Earth Blog called '100 Ways to Undermine the Industrial Machine'. I don't know if there's a hundred things there. But there's certainly lots of other ideas that have come out of it. These are fairly mundane things on the surface. If we just take an idea, but a very important idea, such as bartering and just giving stuff away and not using money – that undermines the industrial economy. That really does. And it's not just at a local level. If you stop buying stuff, if you say, I don't want to buy much stuff, or I'm going to share things, I'm going to give stuff away. Say you've got a surplus of food and you give that food away – that person, who you've given stuff away to, they don't need to work as much. So they stop working in an office that requires them to press buttons and they actually start spending time with their family, or maybe they grow some food themselves, or they decide to learn some other kinds of skills. They're not putting as much tax into the system because they're not working as much for the system, so the system is deprived of money, the economy starts contracting. You can see all of these effects of something as simple as just bartering. It's very, very powerful. But on the surface it looks quite trivial.

And the same can apply to, for instance, just turning televisions off, which is something I do repeat, probably to people's annoyance. If you turn televisions off, then people's – television is still the most powerful messaging system of all. And, if you turn them off, people aren't going to get the messages the system wants you to hear all the time, particularly on commercial TV, but also on the news channels, also embedded in the documentaries, and soap operas that want you to lead other people's lives for them and forget about the life you're living and how trivial it is and how much of a slave you are. Because it's great, I can watch this soap opera and feel that everything's alright because these other people have got far worse lives than I have.' Turn the TVs off and you give the people back something incredibly valuable, which is their time and their will to do something that they might not otherwise have done.

*27. How easy is it to live outside civilization?*

K: Living outside of civilization is not something that anyone can easily do. I can live in the best way I can within my current circumstances. Part of what I do is about trying to change things for the better. If I left civilization, for want of a better term, then I would have absolutely no impact on anyone else. I would be living out in some completely far out area. I would have to learn a hell of a lot of skills, or re-learn them - that I really haven't got at the moment – which I'm trying to acquire. You can live the best you can in the circumstances you are. Personally, I grow as much food as I can, and I use as little energy as I can. And these are fairly superficial things. I think there's more to it than that. It's about trying to create – to get in your mind what it means to be uncivilized, what it means not to be a slave to the system.

And you spend time talking to people; I would say that's just as valuable, if not more valuable than trying to live an entire – just trying to live off-grid, etc. Yeah, well, live off-grid by all means, but you've got to help other people as well. You do not exist in isolation, and by you going off into the wild and saying, 'Right, screw you, I'm off, I'm going to be fine'. Well, A, you won't be fine because you really, as a civilized person, really haven't got the skills to do this. And, B, you need other people. You need to be connected to other people. Humans have never successfully survived in isolation. So, you have to embrace community, and if that community happens to contain a lot of people who are still very civilized, then it's part of a learning process. And you have to bring people with you. You have to let them give you their ideas, and you have to share things.

So, it's not a simple case of just pissing off and doing something else. You need to connect with the people that matter to you, and you need to embrace the idea of togetherness, as well as just trying to be just some super-green person who is a great example to other people.

*28. Keith, thank you very much for talking to me.*

K: It's a pleasure.

*29. 'Time's Up: An Uncivilized Solution to a Global Crisis' is published by Green Books in the UK, and Chelsea Green in North America. It's also available to read for free online at [www.amatterofscale.com](http://www.amatterofscale.com).*

*The address of Keith's blog site, 'The Earth Blog: Giving the Earth A Future', is [www.theearthblog.org](http://www.theearthblog.org).*

*This interview was conducted by Richard Capes for the blogsite [www.moretht.blogspot.com](http://www.moretht.blogspot.com) and recorded on the 5th September 2011. Thank you for listening.*